



Flashes in Puddles

A James Schuyler Poetry Curriculum

Portrait of James Schuyler by Darragh Park. Reprinted with permission of the Estate of James Schuyler.

MARK STATMAN

I sometimes think of James Schuyler as a poet's poet. I don't know a lot of people who know his name (a student once asked if he was a signer of the Declaration of Independence). I know a lot of poets who do but few seem to have actually read him. They vaguely refer to book titles or biography or gossip. It's this known/unknown identification that makes me think him as a poet's poet: if one takes the time to read Schuyler—the striking longer poems (“The Morning of the Poem,” “A Few Days,” “The Crystal Lithium”), the observant and thoughtful earlier poems (“Seeking,” “Looking Forward to Seeing Jane Real Soon,” “The Dog Wants His Dinner”), and the luminous and sometimes heart-breaking later ones (“Autumn Leaves,” “Velvet Roses,” “Birds”)—one seems inexorably to become a member of a small society whose members share a particular appreciation for the kind of quiet, often unobtrusive, brilliance found in Schuyler's work.

James Schuyler (1923–1991), generally acknowledged, with John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, and Barbara Guest, as one of the major voices of the first generation of the New York School of Poetry, is not only a poet's poet, he is a writing teacher's poet. By this I don't mean that one can leaf through his poems and easily happen upon a “this one would be great for teaching” poem, though this will occasionally occur. The longer poems (in part because of length and content) don't easily lend themselves to the elementary or middle-school classroom and even with high school and college students, to teach these poems would require an enormous aesthetic commitment and a good deal of time.¹ The shorter poems can be more useful for teachers of writing looking for “writing ideas,” but this narrow way of reading Schuyler limits how much the poet offers those of us who teach because he can present, sometimes in a single poem, a valuable mini-curriculum for writing poetry.

To illustrate this I've chosen “Flashes,” from the early collection, *Freely Espousing*.²

¹ This is true unless the long poem happens to be the focus of the course work; I'm teaching an advanced course for my college students next spring which will have precisely that focus.

² *Freely Espousing*, Paris Review Editions/Doubleday, Garden City, 1969. “Flashes” reprinted in 1993 in *Collected Poems* by James Schuyler.

Flashes³

Dark day
 hard, swarming
 west
 the Chrysler Building
 silver, soluble
 south
 not a hole
 a depth
 brightening
 almost to pinkness
 smoke
 spreading, climbing
 moving back on itself
 hanging dissolving forming going renewing
 mixed with cloud
 steams
 and darks
 a bird
 snapped by
 it's raining
 just in one spot
 flashes
 in puddles
 on a tar roof

Younger students always seem to ask, *but how do you read this?* Introductory college students sometimes wonder the same thing. But that's part of what a good poem does: it calls into question our ideas about how we read. Or better, how we know we know how to read. The students are concerned that the poem, in part because of its appearance, doesn't make "sense." This is the first challenge of the poem; it gives the reader a different way to see writing on the page.

Of course, the students eventually do get the "sense" of the poem. But here is where "Flashes" offers more than simple sense and where reducing the poem to a simple reading—a poem about changing weather—would take away from how observant and dramatic the poem really is.

In terms of form and content, "Flashes" deals with presence and absence. With respect to content, for example, there is no "I" to speak of, though there is an observer. There is no developed narrative, though there is a story. The location is New York City (the Chrysler Building), but the story of the poem could happen anywhere. Time passes (the storm, the clouds, the sun that appears then disappears from view while remain-

³ "Flashes" from *Collected Poems* by James Schuyler. Copyright ©1993 by the Estate of James Schuyler. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.

ing above, the snapping bird) but the final focus is not on the storm at all but a single moment (the drops of rain flashing).

The structure, the construction, of the poem makes clear how compositionally rigorous free (or open) verse can be. Schuyler pays close attention to formal techniques (the assonance of “Dark day / hard, swarming,” the alliteration of “silver soluble / south”). He uses the techniques of subtraction or erasure to include only the words he thinks matter. Compare the possible:

It was a dark day
The clouds were hard and swarming.
To the west, one could see the Chrysler Building
Looking silver, soluble, etc.

with the final:

Dark day
hard, swarming
west
the Chrysler Building
silver, soluble, etc.

Here the prosiness of the first version gives way to a language that is terse and dramatic: something important is happening.

The technique of arrangement is used to add to the poem’s drama. The storm looms:

spreading, climbing
moving back on itself

and it rushes:

hanging dissolving forming going renewing

In the first two lines the storm is a character, a presence, its physicality heightened by the way one line is set on top of the other. In the following single line, with its tumbling words, we get a sense of the storm’s dynamism. Schuyler accentuates this approach to form, with echoes of projective and concrete verse, as the poem literally seems to flash and rain on the page.⁴

“Flashes” also gives the teacher of poetry an opportunity to illustrate the adage “show don’t tell,” because this poem is all about showing. When I teach it, I actually draw the whole of it on the blackboard. I need chalk (colored is fun but white or yellow alone will do) and eraser. I start with the dark day (lots of chalk covering the board). I

⁴See *The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms*, Ron Padgett, ed., Teachers & Writers Collaborative, New York, 2000, for more on projective and concrete verse.

draw the Chrysler Building in all its art deco styling. I draw a skyline that closes in on two buildings, one from which the poet is observing; one next door, where he can see the tar roof below. I draw the drama of the storm and clouds, erasing clouds to let the sun shine through, then drawing clouds again to make the sun disappear. I draw the bird flying along and then, with a rapid movement of hand and chalk, show it quickly snapped forward by the wind. I end with the puddle and chalk dots that I erase and re-draw, erase and re-draw, like the falling rain.

WHEN I teach “Flashes,” it’s usually because I want the students to write poems in which many things are happening (physical, intellectual, emotional) and to describe these in ways that can be both dramatic and static. I suggest that one way to do this is to write a poem in which they deal with change: changes in the weather, changes in time, in place, in mood, changes in self, in relationships, and so on. I ask them to think not only about what they want to say and how they say it, the words they choose, but also the page they present.

In this way, teaching “Flashes” lends itself to teaching revision, with a focus on every word and the arrangement of those words and lines. I usually encourage, even strongly insist, the students write the poem in numerous drafts. In the first draft, I suggest they write as descriptively as possible, as completely and clearly as they can. I tell them not to worry about how much they are putting in. My point here is that in subsequent drafts, they will get to spend as much time considering what to take out as they’ve spent considering what to put in.⁵

DANA CAMPBELL, 4TH GRADE

Sad

This is the month that sad has
become.

Snow coming,
flowers dying,
leaves falling.

That’s when
sad has become.

JESSICA MCGRATH, 4TH GRADE

Alone

I’m

Alone.

I’m just alone. I try to listen
but no one’s talking.

I think I like it. It’s not silent.

⁵For a further discussion of techniques of revision, see “Coda: The Necessary Art of Revision,” in my book *Listener in the Snow: The Practice and Teaching of Poetry*, Teachers & Writers Collaborative, New York, 2000.

I'm happy.

I'm alone and I don't hear

it.

But

I

Do

I

can

do anything, I'm alone

I'm just alone

I'm just alone

I'm just alone

I'm just alone

DANIELLE LEITMAN, 4TH GRADE
Where Did I Go Right?

reaching

into

my

pocket

losing the silence that fills the
air, looking for it but it's...

not there

I go looking to see the people pass
me by

buzzing

humming won't go away

It's raining the pounding won't
stop

in command

I go to think: did I find the
place of silence?

my mind?

NICK CARTER, 4TH GRADE

The cold blue

running water is flowing
As the sun goes down the ducks
look for lost coves for the
night
 quack
 quack
 quack
The ducks fly quickly over the water

 The wood ducks stay in the
wide river
The cool blue river is now
freezing and black
The wood duck's bright color is gone
The red fox lurks through the night
It seems like the coyote's howl
goes on for infinity
The ducks and other day animals are asleep
Nocturnals are up but the river
is as black as night itself

